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The Black Demon

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THE tom-toms beat all night and this morning the streets are fairly covered with chicken feathers. For black smallpox has taken the city and must be driven out. The priests have told the people to kill chickens and strew their feathers in the streets so they will catch the eye of Polerimah, the plague demon, and distract her attention. The tom-toms throbbing in the air will either frighten her or please her so much that she will forget to jump down the throats of any careless mortals whom she might find with mouths opened in speaking, or with lips parted, or sleeping with uncovered faces. Yes! the goddess Polerimah is angry with the people.

Yesterday afternoon they made a big *tamasha*, or feast, in her honor. A few of us foreigners heard that it was to take place and went down to the bazar to see what we could see.

In the very heart of the bazar, our native servants told us, we should find Polerimah in all her glory. We wedged our way through the masses of men and women who filled the place and found ourselves at last before the little hut of green reeds that had been erected over the goddess. I must confess I was surprised and disappointed at what I saw when I peeped in. After all the fuss they had made and the huge pile of rice they had heaped up as an offering, I expected to see at least a life-sized lady demon. But instead I saw only a squat little figure, no more than a foot tall, made of black mud and covered with tinsel. She was soaked with lemon-colored water which dripped off her shoulders into a widely spreading puddle round her feet.

"Why so much wetness?" I asked with an amused smile.

"They must keep her cool," answered our guide with great dignity. "If she gets warm she gets mad. So they have built this temple of reeds to protect her from the sun, and every few minutes the priests pour saffron tinted water over her. Whatever happens she must be kept cool."

It seems that if she gets hot she gets hot all through, and no amount of sacrifice or *poojah* worship will offset the effect.

In front of the "wickie-up" was a constantly increasing pile of cooked rice awaiting its sprinkling of life-blood to make it a food fit to satisfy the ravenous and blood-thirsty appetite of the goddess. Just beyond the rice-pile we could see a priest sitting on the ground bending over a smudge pot of burning incense. At that moment he turned to look at us and the terrible shape of his countenance made us cringe. His eyes were blood red and swollen and his sensuous mouth hung open. He was waiting for the demon to leap through the smoke and down his throat.

"Then," said our guide, "when he is demon-possessed, he will speak, and whatever he says the people will do it."

But apparently our appearance on the scene had acted as a wet blanket on the heating up of his passion. Such an hysterical outburst, called demon-possession, is almost always a fraud. The fit is merely assumed by self-hypnotism of the senses so that apparently inspired frenzy may conceal what is merely the cut and dried schemes of a shameless, heathen priesthood. Under our gaze, at any rate, the fellow became restive, and finally abandoned his incense pot and went slinking off through the crowd. I found

out afterwards that the man was an educated Brahman. Our timely advent saved the people at least the price that his ravings would have exacted from them.

We watched for a while the delegations of men and women coming from different parts of the town, bringing their offerings to Polerimah. With the blare of horns, the throb of tom-toms, the cries of the frantic wild-eyed dancers, band after band came in unvarying march around the little hut-temple, presenting their offerings and augmenting the rice pile. The priests meanwhile fought among themselves for the various tid-bits and dainties that the more zealous women had brought with their rice. The scene began to take on the aspects of a dog-fight as the priests, getting more excited, snarled and snatched delectable morsels from the women and even from one another. Hearing a commotion behind us we turned to see a band of priests coming up on the run, leading a buffalo bull. He was dyed with saffron, a wonderful canary yellow, and hung with garlands and with flowers. Behind him came a huge, savage black-faced fellow, holding aloft a great sickle-shaped knife in a hand that was white as snow.

"The bull is another offering," muttered my guide in my ear. "The big priest with the white hand must strike off his head with a single blow of the knife, and then the blood must be sprinkled all over

the sacred rice pile before the goddess will accept her feast."

Men around us began pushing, and suddenly we found ourselves the center of a crush of swaying, wildly yelling men, every one determined upon witnessing the death of the bull. I was torn and shoved about, until in my struggle to stem the human tide and escape, I was thrust ankle deep into the sacred pile of rice. The priests, seeing what I had done, fairly raged. Though I could not understand their words, the harsh tones of their screams and their looks of malicious devilish hatred told me volumes. I ducked out of that crowd as fast as I could go.

When I had put a safe distance between myself and the raging priests, I looked back to see that the mass of humans had closed in and were again whirling and pushing round. By this time the sun had slid pretty well down toward the horizon, and it was evident that something more was about to happen. A sudden yell was followed by a mad surging of the crowd toward the temple which they tore to pieces in almost less time than it takes to tell it. In another instant everyone was waving a reed in the air.

"Now what will they do?" we asked.

"They are arranging to escort the goddess out of the town," said our guide. "They have done every thing they could

to appease her anger and make her happy; and now they are going to carry her out of town while she is still in a happy frame of mind, and throw her in the ocean."

The procession was formed. First came the priest carrying on his head a basket in which were the bull's entrails, crowned by his head, holding in his hideous, grinning mouth the bone of his front fore-leg. Behind him came the goddess, carried on the head of another priest. And as the throng proceeded down the street, people by the wayside wrung the necks of chickens and threw the headless bloody bodies over the people's heads toward the image. The horns blew, the tom-toms throbbed and the people yelled themselves hoarse, waving their reeds in the air. What is the priest screaming?

"Yell, brother, yell. Let confusion reign! Let not the terrible Polerimah suspect our fell designs, and fall upon us, before we are safely rid of her!"

Following in the wake of the procession, I came up to a young mother who was hurrying along dragging a tiny child by the hand. The little girl was staggering, her bare body was a mass of scars, her eyes heavy and dull with the intoxication of the dread disease. The child mother cried out to Polerimah to have mercy. As her wails mingled with the shrieks of thousands the procession passed down the crooked, dusty road and out of sight.

Tonight, out there in the dark somewhere, many young mothers are sitting in black despair, because in spite of all their sacrifices to the demon, the lives of their babies stricken with the fearful plague are surely ebbing away.

It is our privilege to tell them, who understand love so well, that the love of the Great Physician, himself, is waiting to take the place of fear in their hearts and that his servants are waiting to minister to them.

CLOUGH MEMORIAL HOSPITAL,
Ongole, South India.

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